A SAINT JOHN’S STORY

By Sherry Wildfeuer

Once upon a time, there was a royal family that wisely ruled a large land that had two high hills. On one hill the royal family lived comfortably in a beautiful castle, with forests and rich farm fields all around it. Farmers and gardeners worked busily, foresters cut firewood, and crafts people made useful and beautiful items for all to enjoy.

But the royal couple became aware that the people in the neighboring land were suffering from a terrible illness. They had too little to eat, and no land to grow food or even flowers. With this knowledge, the king and queen could no longer be content with the good life in their own land. They knew they must do something to help their neighbors.

On the far border of their realm, on the second high hill, there was a spring of healing water, but no one had climbed the hill for many years because the way was long, and those who set off stopped and stayed in the villages along the way.

So the king and queen called together their seven children and asked if they would undertake the journey to reach the healing spring and bring back the water of life that could heal their neighbors.

The seven children agreed to the adventure and promised their mother that they would care for one another on the way. So, with a mixture of sadness and hope, the royal couple packed up all that would be needed for the journey and sent them on their way.

It was not easy for the children to be away from the comforts of the royal castle, to walk long hours each day, to cook for themselves, and sleep on the hard ground at night. Especially the oldest prince missed the sweet treats that the royal baker had made for them each day, and his own favorite hunting dog and horse.

When they came to the first village at the bottom of the high hill, he was happy to find a bakery shop, a soft bed to sleep in, and a dog and a horse he could care for. Although his sisters and brothers tried to remind him of the neighboring land in need and of their promise to their parents, he was not willing to travel on with them the following day, and they had to leave him behind.

The oldest princess was now the leader, but she was missing all the entertainments of their royal life, and the pretty dresses and hats and shoes she had left behind. When they came to the second village, she was delighted to find musicians on every corner and shops with all the latest fashionable clothes. In the morning, her sisters and brothers could not convince her to continue the journey, for she was content to stay in the village.

Now the five children went on, led by the next oldest prince. He was a social fellow who was always friendly. But in his heart, he always wished for people to like him best and to be the favorite prince. At the next village, they learned that its leader had just died. The people were happy to greet the children from the royal family, and it was not hard for them to prevail upon the prince to stay and become their leader.

The next morning, only four children set off on the winding road up the hill, led by their sister. For her, this was a long time to be away from the comforts and routines of home life in the castle. She missed the safety and security of her life there, and although her parents had really provided everything they needed, she was a creature of habit and didn’t like the discomforts of life on the road. When they came to the next village, there was an Inn where everything was provided to make her feel at home, and in the morning, she was not willing to leave.

Now, only the three youngest children were able to remember the reason for the journey and their promise to the queen that they would take care of one another. The road grew steeper now, and harder to climb. But the air was clear and fresh. In the next village, all the people were bright with interest in their quest for the healing water. They knew about it and could point out their further path. From a high ledge, they could look back on the villages down the hill and see their own castle on the hill in the distance. They could even see the region of the neighboring land, which was darkened by suffering. The older boy was fascinated by the wisdom and breadth of vision of the people in this village, and he could not bring himself to leave it in the morning.

Now, only the two youngest princesses were willing to climb on higher. They kept recalling to each other how hard it was for the people in the neighboring land to suffer from the stress of hunger and poverty and illness. They kept the vision they had gained on the rocky ledge, and clambered further ahead. At last, they reached a small group of simple huts where people lived in constant devotion. From the power of their souls they directed loving strength to all below them on the steep hill and beyond. Here the sisters were welcomed and could join them in their evening prayer.

In the morning, only the youngest sister was willing to seek further for the healing spring. Tearfully, the girls said good-bye. As the youngest child walked up the hill alone, her heart was filled with love for the neighboring people, for her dear parents who had sent their beloved children in search of help for them, and for her sisters and brothers who had stayed along the way. She was filled with hope that the clear, glass bottle, which it had been her task to carry, would soon bring the water of life back to them all. That evening, just as the sun was about to set, the girl came to a small pool fed by a crystal-clear spring. Beside it sat a large, bearded man, clothed in animal skins, who greeted her kindly. His name was John. He shared his meal of berries and nuts and herbs with her. And together they drank of the water of life.

John spoke to the child about the loving Source of the healing spring, who had been sent from heaven to give his life for the healing of all people. She treasured his words in her heart. He told her that the healing of the neighboring people must begin with a change of the ways in her own land.

In the morning, they filled the glass bottle, and the girl began her long journey home. When she reached the small settlement, the first one she met was her sister, who had been actively praying for her. The youngest princess spoke about John and the Source of the healing spring. Then she put a drop of its precious water into a bowl of water, and with that she washed her sister’s feet. This gave her the strength she would need to part from her new-found friends and undertake the journey back to the castle.

In the morning, the girls left the devotional community and re-traced their steps down the hill. As they approached the village with the clear view, their brother saw them coming and greeted them joyfully. The three of them spoke late into the night about John and the Source of the healing spring. Then the youngest princess anointed her brother’s eyes with a drop of its water, and to his far-seeing was now added a depth of inner vision. Now he knew that he too must travel back to the castle to help the people in the neighboring land.

After days of walking, they came to the village where their dear sister had made herself at home in the Inn. She welcomed them warmly and prepared beds and food for them all. Then they sat by the fire and the younger ones told about John’s call to change their ways. The youngest princess put a drop of healing water on the heart of her sister, and suddenly she felt that her own comfort was no comfort at all as long as the people in the neighboring land did not have good homes as well. So she willingly joined the others on their way back to help.

When they came to the next village, their brother was giving a stirring speech in the center of town, and the people all applauded at the end. He was glad to see his siblings and hear about the higher regions of the hill, about John and the Source of the healing spring. Then the youngest princess placed a drop of its precious water on his lips. At that moment, the prince could understand that words were to be used to help and heal, and not merely to draw attention to himself. He realized that he would be needed at home to teach people how to change their ways. And so, he began by speaking with the village council to find a capable leader to take his place, and he set off with the others for home.

At the next village, they found their sister out and about, enjoying all that the culture had to offer. They shared with her what they had seen and learned on the top of the hill, and then she received a drop of healing water on each hand. From this moment on, her one desire was to create art and beauty and practical things for all those in need of them, and she joined her siblings on their way home.

At the base of the hill, the oldest prince was now very familiar with all the best bakers and cooks in the town, and he had the best dog and horse to accompany him wherever he went. But he was glad to see his sisters and brothers and be reminded of the reason for their journey and to hear of their adventures. He received a drop of healing water right on his belly, and suddenly he knew that as long as some people had no bread or nourishing food, no special treats would ever taste so good to him again. He felt called upon to use what he knew about food to share with others in the neighboring land.

And so, all the seven children travelled back to their parents, who received with gratitude their stories and new-found wisdom. The king and queen each received a drop of the water of life on their brow. With this, they could remember that long ago, their land and the neighbors’ had been one land. But the best part had been stolen by their ancestors, and what was left for the neighbors was far too poor. For this reason, their realm had thrived and the neighbors had not. The king and queen understood that healing would require sacrifice of their crowns from them, and for all in their land to share the bounty that came from their unfair advantages. They declared that the two lands must become reunited.

Then, each of the princes and princesses brought forward their gifts to help. They spoke and planned together, and invited their neighbors to ask what made sense to them. Through their long suffering, deep wisdom, strength and vision had developed in many of their neighbors, and they brought these gifts to the planning. But others had grown faint and weak and angry from the long waiting, and these needed the most care. The youngest princess was ever ready to share out the drops of healing water. As long as it was given away, it continued to replenish itself. She met others in the poorer land who had also made the journey to the healing spring, and they learned together how best to use its water to help the people and the land.

In the rich land, many were ready to join forces with the neighbors. But others had grown attached to their comforts and sense of superiority, and these people needed to be taught by the prince with the gift of speech why changes were needed.

The full reuniting of the two lands and their people will take a long time, but those who are working towards healing light bonfires on the night of June 24th each year, so that St. John, who guards the healing spring and welcomes those who climb to the top of the hill, can see and take confidence that the work is being done. He knows, however, that no human effort can suffice to undo the harm that has been done. Only the loving Source of the water of life can, over lifetimes, compensate for the pain endured, and bring meaning and redemption to the injustices suffered.